

Henshaw, H. W.:-
Hawks and their uses.

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HAWKS, AND THEIR USES.

BY H. W. HENSHAW.

"DARN all hawks!" I once heard a farmer's boy say; and this highly objectionable but pithy exclamation very tersely expresses the general estimation in which birds of prey are held, the whole country over. Too often the dislike of the farmer-boy takes a more deadly form than a foolish remark, and the ever-ready gun is called upon as a final means of righting all assumed injuries.

In truth, the idea that every bird with beak and talons is a harmful creature, to be got rid of at first opportunity, is a widespread one, and so popular, withal, that legislators are ever ready to pass laws, not only permitting hawks and owls to be slaughtered at any and all seasons of the year, but putting a price upon their heads. In a period of eighteen months, the county treasuries in the State of Pennsylvania paid out \$100,000 as bounties for the slaying of animals supposed to be harmful, of which amount, probably not less than \$65,000 was paid for hawks and owls!

Nor need we seek far for the reasons of the feeling against birds of prey. The general dislike arises in large part from an utter ignorance of their habits and the useful purpose which they serve, and more directly from a bad practice, indulged in by a few species, of preying upon the farmer's poultry-yard, or of attacking game-birds. Let us then glance at the matter as impartially as we may, giving credit for usefulness where credit is due, placing guilt where it belongs, and then see to which side the balance falls.

For present purposes, our hawks may be roughly divided into two classes, though the two grade together: large and small, or slow fliers and swift fliers; for most of the big hawks are slow of movement, while all the small species are swift of wing. Singling out two of the largest species, which happen to be very numerous in the eastern United States, we find

them to be the Red-tailed Hawk (Fig. 1, page 794) and the Red-shouldered Hawk (Fig. 2). Though, at a distance, it may trouble you to tell one from the other, their larger size generally distinguishes them from other kinds, whether they be sitting motionless in a dead stub, or sailing in wide circles high in air.

These especially are known as the "hen hawks," by the farmer, and they are considered to be fair game for all, to be shot, trapped, or poisoned whenever seen, for the good of the farm. As a matter of fact, are these hawks poultry-thieves, deserving their bad name? The answer is, no. The food of the two species has been most carefully studied, numerous specimens of these two kinds being among the more than a thousand hawks and owls which have been examined by the Agricultural Department at Washington. It would teach a farmer something to note how rarely in the food of the hundreds examined has any trace of poultry, or indeed of any bird, been found.

Naturalists who have noted how frequently these hawks are found near the edges of small ponds and streams and about meadows, are not surprised to learn that, in the spring, frogs and snakes constitute the chief part of their fare, and that at other times the meadow-mouse (*Arvicola*) is their usual food. Others, however, who have never paid any special attention to their habits, will probably be surprised to hear this.

Certainly no one will begrudge the hawks all the frogs they choose to catch; and while snakes are far from useless, they are not favorites with the people, and the thinning out of their number by these hawks will not be at all regretted. As for meadow-mice and such vermin, they are destructive, and though small, yet so rapidly do they increase, and so great are their numbers, that they do the crops very considerable injury—injury which would be a thousand-

fold greater were it not for the services of these hawks. The mice destroy much grass in summer, and in winter they injure large numbers (sometimes hundreds in a night) of young fruit-trees. Tunneling beneath the snow, they girdle the bark under its cover, so that there is no visible sign of their work until the snow melts. No doubt both these hawks do some damage to poultry, and doubtless both species snatch an occasional rabbit or partridge, but so heavy of wing and clumsy are they, that such acts are but rare happenings in their lives. Admitting the worst that can be said against them, however, the occasional mischief they do in this way is made up for, many times over, by their constant warfare against rats, mice, and similar animals.

It is said that when a tiger once tastes human blood, he ever after prefers it to all other food. It is doubtless much the same with a hawk, whether of the species we are now considering or of others to be mentioned. A poultry-yard being once visited, and a taste of chicken secured, the visit is very sure to be repeated. Under such circumstances, surely, the farmer is justified in acting as judge, jury, and executioner of the wrong-doer; but, it is to be added, he is hardly justified in declaring war against the whole hawk tribe, and in destroying the innocent and guilty alike.

The Rough-legged Hawk (Fig. 3, page 794) is another large species, a little larger than either of the others, and even heavier on the wing. Breeding further north, it visits New England and the Middle States chiefly in fall and winter. Doubtless he is often mistaken for his cousins, and called a "hen hawk." At all events, he is usually shot on sight; if for no other reason, then because of his fierce looks. And truly, with his heavy hooked bill and cruel-looking claws, he would seem to be dangerous enough to the poultry. Yet, notwithstanding his size and strength, he, too, is equipped for no more daring raid than an attack on a defenseless frog or snake, or the slaying of meadow-mice. Of the last this hawk consumes a great number,—probably all but a twentieth of his food consists of them,—while he rarely touches poultry or birds at all.

Very different in appearance and habits from the above species is the goshawk (Fig. 4) or, as

he is ominously styled in northern New England, the "blue hen-hawk." Of rather slender build, when full-grown, a hawk of this sort measures from twenty to twenty-four inches in length. It is bluish slate-color above; below, white, crossed with many zigzag slate-colored lines. Though more numerous in the mountains of the far West and in the British possessions, the goshawk is not uncommon in our northernmost States in fall and winter, and occasionally even builds its nests in that region. It is a bird that loves the woods, and is oftener met in the shade of the dense pine and spruce woods than any other hawk. For strength and bravery, this hawk is not surpassed by any bird of prey.

It feeds upon ducks, pigeons, hares, grouse, and poultry. It is the type of a true hunting-falcon, flying rapidly a few feet above the ground, and descending with a swift rush on the luckless prey detected by its sharp eyes. It is daring to rashness, and unlucky is the farmer whose poultry-yard becomes familiar ground to one of these hawks. Almost before the frightened fowls have had time to sound the alarm, it has selected and seized its victim, and is away more quickly than the gun can be snatched from its corner.

Audubon once saw one of these falcons rush upon a flock of the birds called grackles as they were crossing the Ohio River. The birds in their fright collected into a compact mass, the hawk dashed among them, and, seizing first one and then another, killed five before the flock could escape to the woods on the further bank.

A closely related European species was one of the falconers' favorites in the old days, and was used in hunting hares, pheasants, partridges, teal, doves, and crows. Doubtless our own goshawk could readily be trained to hunt game, but of course the falconers' days are practically over, though it is said a few falcons are still trained in England.

The American Peregrine Falcon or Duck Hawk (Fig. 5) is another notable species, though one in which the farmer takes less interest, both because it is a rather uncommon bird, and because it is found chiefly on the seashore and the banks of rivers.

Like the goshawk, the duck hawk is dark blue above, while the white underparts are barred and streaked with black. It is more



THE QUARRY.

(FROM A PAINTING BY EUGÈNE FROMENTIN. ENGRAVED BY T. COLE FROM A PHOTOGRAPH, BY PERMISSION OF A. BRAUN & CO.)



FIG. 1. RED-TAILED HAWK.*



FIG. 2. RED-SHOULDERED HAWK.



FIG. 3. ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK.

compactly built than the goshawk, and is smaller, being only about seventeen inches long. Unlike most other hawks, it rarely or never builds in trees, but places its nest on lonely and inaccessible ledges in the mountains or on cliffs by the sea.



FIG. 4. AMERICAN GOSHAWK.

Though smaller than the preceding, the duck-hawk is in no wise inferior to it in prowess and strength of wing. It attacks any bird that is not larger than a mallard duck. It has been known even to kill and eat the sparrow-hawk. Its favorite food, nevertheless, seems to be water-fowl; and I have more than once seen it in pursuit of them far out at sea—a flight of fifty or

even a hundred miles being but pastime to this fierce wanderer. It often proves its barbarity by killing more than it needs for food, apparently just for the pleasure of the hunt. Confident of its power of flight, the duck-hawk makes no attempt to conceal itself, but boldly starting the game, pursues it until it closes with its victim and bears it struggling to the ground.

While out one day on a little stream near Tucson, Arizona, I heard a loud quacking, and presently I saw a mallard duck coming toward me at a tremendous pace, hotly pursued by a duck-hawk. Though pressing forward for dear life, the duck's outcries told of its distress, and it evidently felt that escape was impossible. The greater danger blinded it to the lesser,—or was it sagacity that prompted it to fly straight to me? At all events, its trust in man saved its life; for when the hawk had come almost within gunshot, the fear of man overcame appetite, and it gave up the chase in disgust, while the duck sought safer quarters.

The gunners know this hawk well, and many a duck that the hunter has laid low falls to the share of this robber of the air. The European

* The pictures of hawks in this article are from "The Birds of North America," and are used by kind permission of Mr. Robert Ridgway, one of the authors of that work.

peregrine, which ours much resembles, formerly played an important part in falconry, and became the pet of kings and nobles, and it was the fe-



FIG. 5. DUCK-HAWK, OR PEREGRINE FALCON.

male of this species that was called the "gentil" or "gentle falcon." Herons were the principal game hunted with this bird, and he who knew not "a hawk from a hernshaw," as Hamlet says, was regarded as ignorant indeed. The favorite time for the sport was when the herons were passing from the heronry to the ponds after food, or upon their return in the evening, especially if the herons had to fly against the wind.

When a couple of hawks were flown at a heron, the latter at once threw out any food he happened to have, "to lighten ballast" as a sailor would say, and endeavored to mount in air so as to give the hawks no chance to strike him from above; and thus all three ascended in a series of spirals. When one of the falcons reached an advantageous point above, he immediately endeavored to close with the heron, and if he missed, the other took a turn. When one of them finally seized the heron, his companion "bound" to him, as it was termed, and the three descended lightly to the ground, the hawks breaking the fall with outstretched wings.

In days past, this falcon was carefully protected by man for his sport, and severe penalties were visited upon any one who molested or destroyed it. We live now, however, in more prosaic days; and, noble bird though it be, few claims to mercy can be urged in favor of the peregrine falcon. Its food consists largely of useful birds, and as its talons are against every creature it can master, so must the hand of man be raised against it.

Fig. 6.—The Broad-winged Hawk, though smaller than most of the foregoing, is still a large bird, an old male hawk measuring somewhere from thirteen to fifteen inches from tip of bill to end of tail, while the female measures

from sixteen to eighteen inches. It may be said that as a rule among birds of prey, the female is always considerably the larger. As their strength is according to size, it is supposed that its larger size enables the female to provide better for her family; though the male, however, lends his best assistance. Now as to their food. Most people will admit that our Broad-wing has a just claim upon gratitude, when they know that its chosen bill-of-fare includes snakes, toads, and frogs, but not many mice, and very few birds of any sort. It is, moreover, very fond of the larvæ (or caterpillars) of the big night-flying moths.

Fig. 7.—The Marsh Hawk, also, has a broad expanse of wing, and is, perhaps, from its peculiar habits, much easier to know than any of our large hawks. His long tail and slim body with its white rump, and his habit of "beating" lightly, but not swiftly, over meadows and fields, just above the tops of the grass, cause him to be readily recognized. He sometimes trespasses by snatching a sparrow or lark, but the food he prefers, and that upon which he chiefly lives, is mice, ground squirrels, and such little gnawers. No impudent raider of the hennery is he, but a living mouse-trap, and so carefully does he quarter and beat over his hunting-ground that he is called the "marsh harrier."

His family connections, however, give him a bad name, his good deeds are forgotten, and many a harrier thus falls victim to the ignorant crusade against the whole hawk tribe, or to the thoughtlessness of the sportsman to whom a wing shot is a temptation not to be resisted.



FIG. 6. BROAD-WINGED HAWK.

There are many other large hawks scattered over the United States, but the above are the ones oftenest found in the eastern section of our



FIG. 7. MARSH-HAWK.

country. As will be seen, they are, with two exceptions, really useful to farmers, feeding upon creatures that for the most part are certainly useless and injurious to man, while the harm they do the poultry and game is so slight as to scarcely weigh in the balance against them. The two injurious species, besides being uncommon, may readily be known from the others.

Passing now to what we may call the small hawks, let us glance at the two most important,



FIG. 8. COOPER'S-HAWK.

—important by reason of size and misdeeds: the Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks.

Fig. 8.—The old male Cooper's Hawk is

from 14 to 17 inches long; the female 18 to 20 inches. Fig. 9.—The male Sharp-shinned Hawk, a miniature of the last-named, measures from 10 to 11½ inches, while the female measures 12½ to 14 inches. Size, however, does not count for much in the matter of hawk effectiveness, and the two rascals now on trial before us, though small, are remarkable for speed and impudence. Woe betide the flock of small birds that attracts the attention of one of these winged bullets! Possessing speed and courage in the highest degree, they search along hedgerows and copses, pass in graceful flight among the orchard trees, and follow their winding paths through tangled brush and vine, with the hope of surprising some luckless sparrow, dove, or quail. The terrified bird tries to fly, or, better, to dodge into some

friendly brush pile or thorny patch. The hawk instantly pursues; and fortunate indeed is the fugitive he has once started if it escape the clutch of his sharp talons. Well have both these rascals earned the name "chicken hawk,"

for both of them are true hardened thieves of the barn-yard, and do

not hesitate to snatch a pullet from under the very nose of the irate farmer—and even to return in the afternoon of the same day to repeat the robbery.

Little can be said in their favor, but so sudden are their attacks and so rapid their flight, either in charge or retreat, that only now and then do they come to grief, while their sins are visited on their larger, more honest, and more stupid relatives.

I am sure that hawks enjoy bullying weaker birds, and that not infrequently they chase them about, so as to enjoy their fright and discomfit-



FIG. 9. SHARP-SHINNED HAWK.

ure, when they do not mean to prey upon them. I have seen a Cooper's hawk pursue a raven, and evidently consider the chase a huge joke, and I have seen other hawks enjoying the same sort of fun.

Fig. 10.—The Pigeon Hawk, so called from its size and bluish color, makes a fit comrade of the other two. Though no less destructive to bird-life, since it is smaller it must necessarily prey upon smaller birds; and the poultry-yards are usually free from its visits unless, indeed, a yard contains young chickens. It is a beautiful hawk, but its presence in a neighborhood is a constant danger to everything it dares to attack.

Fig. 11.—The Sparrow Hawk, our smallest hawk and the most abundant of its tribe, is certainly a very valuable ally to the farmer. When it can obtain them, grasshoppers are its favorite food, and it rarely eats anything else. When these are not to be had, it captures mice and small birds, many more of the former than of the latter. The destruction of grasshoppers means little in the East, but in the far West, in the regions of the grasshopper plague, it means much; and the number of the winged pests destroyed by the sparrow hawk is not easily reckoned.

Notwithstanding this fact, the State of Colorado passed a law, a few years ago, offering a bounty on hawks, owls, and various animals, and vast numbers of sparrow and other hawks were sacrificed and paid for by the State, because the hawks of other species were supposed to be guilty of stealing poultry. The sparrow hawk

when captured young is readily tamed, and makes a gentle and interesting pet, perching upon the hand, readily recognizing its friends, and becoming quite friendly.

The West contains another hawk, of large size, the Swainson's Hawk, which also appears to live entirely upon grasshoppers in their season. It seems remarkable that birds of such powerful build and provided with such talons should be fitted out so formidably for the destruction of a humble insect prey!

The time may come when some of the Western States will be glad to buy back the aid of these winged friends of the farmer at twice the price now paid for their destruction.

For the sake of its curious food, I will call attention to the remarkable Everglade Kite of Florida. It feeds almost entirely upon a kind of large snail. The talons of this kite are long, and curved just enough to enable it to grasp the globular shell, while the long, abruptly hooked mandible is admirably fitted to extract the contents. Wonderfully sharp eyes these hawks must have, for I never was able to find one of these mollusks alive in the Everglade marshes, yet the hawks have no trouble to find all they want, judging from the number of empty shells.

The Swallow-tailed Kite, perhaps the most graceful of all our hawks, is also a bird of sunny skies. It feeds very largely upon snakes, and when it has seized one it mounts high in air, and then, as it floats in graceful circles, it leisurely devours its prey. This hawk is very fond of wasps' larvæ, and it adroitly dives under the palmetto leaves and picks off the wasps' nests.



FIG. 10. PIGEON-HAWK.



FIG. 11. AMERICAN SPARROW-HAWK.



JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT.

BLESS me! Vacation days are here again! and so are hosts and hosts of city youngsters, all ready for a summer in the country!

Well, I wish you joy, one and all, and everybody,—city folk who go to the woods, fields, and seashores, and country folk who seek the sights of the town, and charms of bricks and mortar. And I specially wish joy to all city young folks who do what they can toward helping along the “fresh-air funds” devoted to giving the poor children of big cities a breath of pure country air and some of the sweet delights of country life.

Who 'll do it? Yes, all speak at once, if you wish. It is n't one bit impolite to do so on such occasions as this, the dear Little Schoolma'am tells me.

SAILS ON BICYCLES.

My birds are beginning to watch the bicyclers, and bicyclers I think must have been taking special notice of the birds. At least I have heard hints that small sails or wings may be attached to spry three-wheelers and the speed increased thereby—while their riders' labors are much lessened.

Sails have been tried by a very few cyclers in England. Who will try them here, boys? Be sure to have your masts strong and very light; be careful in the handling; and don't frighten the horses!

A NEW EIFFEL TOWER.

A COOL and refreshing variety of the Eiffel Tower may yet be standing near St. Petersburg, in Russia, unless the warm weather has melted it away. At all events, it was standing there in March last, on the banks of the river Neva,—a beautiful structure built of thousands of blocks of ice, towering at least one hundred and fifty feet into the air.

It had restaurants, too, and observation plat-

forms; and I am told that the Russians, little and big, seemed to enjoy it very much.

If it were possible for an enterprising American to bring this fine Eiffel Tower over here as successfully as the Obelisk was brought over, what a delightful summer resort it would make!

Now you shall hear Lottie's account, drawn from life, of

HOW THE BEETLES BURIED A SNAKE,

PORT MONMOUTH, N. J.

DEAR JACK: I live on a farm; something quite interesting happened here about three weeks ago, so I want to tell you about it. One day my father was walking in the melon patch, when he saw a snake, about seventeen inches long, trying to swallow a toad. Now we do not like snakes, but toads are very useful in destroying insects. Father stepped on the snake's neck, and the toad, escaping from the suddenly opened mouth, hopped away. Father then killed the snake. The next day he went out again and not seeing the snake at once, looked around for it. He soon saw about three inches of tail sticking up from the earth; he pulled it and out came the rest of the snake. It was “standing on its head,” being buried head downward in a perpendicular hole fourteen inches down. There were a quantity of red beetles inside and around the skin, a good deal of the flesh having been eaten. Father thought that the beetles pushed their way down and let the snake drop after. The snake was what is called a “garter” snake. I do not know the name of the beetle; perhaps you do; it is large and of a bright red color.

Your interested reader

LOTTIE E. W.—.

STOP THIEF!

My birds have brought in a startling story of last summer, calculated to alarm all lovers of good order. It is a true story, the particulars of which may be of interest to you all.

It appears, according to V. I. A, who sends you the account, that in the city of Brooklyn, N. Y., live two brothers who have been much interested in bee-culture. For some years they have had hives of fine Italian bees, which they have kept upon the roof of their house; and from them they have for several seasons taken as much as sixty pounds of honey at a time. There were three hives, set one above another, containing, early in September, about fifty pounds of honey in the comb.

It became needful to make some repairs upon the roof or the chimney, and workmen were busily engaged therewith, when all at once the bees came in swarms, dashed at them right and left, buzzing and stinging furiously.

The men struck them down and fought them off as well as they could, and finally threw hot water upon them, destroying a great number. The owners hoped that when the commotion had subsided the few that were left would return to the hives; hence they carefully avoided going to the roof, trusting that the bees would become quiet and resume work.

The next day was warm and beautiful. As the sun's rays suffused the atmosphere, such numbers of bees settled down upon the house that it was dangerous to go in or out of the doors, and the windows had to be closed to shut out the noise of

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